

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE AND EURASIA
ROBERT BLAKE
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE
BUREAU OF SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS
July 24, 2012
“U.S. ENGAGEMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA”

Chairman Burton, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today on the status of U.S. engagement in Central Asia. I would particularly like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for all you have done to support our efforts, including your leadership of one of the largest Congressional delegations ever to Central Asia earlier this month. The high level reception you received testifies to the desire of our Central Asian partners to strengthen relations with the United States and your visit was a major step in that direction. So, thanks to you and the other members of your delegation for making this grueling but very productive trip.

In my testimony today, I would like to review our regional priorities with Central Asia, and then discuss briefly each country.

Central Asia is an increasingly important region to the United States, and we work with each country on a broad range of policy priorities. The Obama Administration’s review of Central Asia policy identified a number of key strategic priorities, ranging from enhanced support for Afghanistan to economic development, including the economic empowerment of women, energy

cooperation, promotion of democracy and human rights, and working together to combat transnational threats such as narcotics trafficking and violent extremism. The countries of Central Asia are an important part of our vision of a secure and stable Afghanistan integrated into a stable, secure, and prosperous region. The drawdown of forces from Afghanistan between now and 2014 makes our engagement with Central Asia even more critical.

Through our annual bilateral consultation mechanism, or in the case of Kazakhstan, a strategic partnership dialogue, we seek to achieve increased cooperation on regional security and support for Afghanistan; greater economic and commercial ties; progress on democracy and human rights issues such as preventing trafficking in persons, freedom of religion, greater space for political expression, and support for civil society; and enhanced scientific, cultural and educational cooperation.

Regional Security

Mr. Chairman, the Central Asian governments share our priority to maintain security in the region after the 2014 transition in Afghanistan. We continue to view our security assistance funding as an important mechanism for ensuring the future stability of Afghanistan and its neighbors. In fiscal year 2011, we provided about \$170 million in security assistance in the areas of border security, counternarcotics, counterterrorism, law enforcement and military. In the latter

area, we will have provided more than \$6 million in Foreign Military Financing and \$3 million in International Military Education and Training. Looking forward to 2013, the Administration has requested a slight increase in military assistance levels to continue support for these same efforts.

Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have played a significant role in our efforts in Afghanistan by participating in the Northern Distribution Network. Over the last year we have expanded the capacity of the program to include multiple, alternate routes for our personnel and cargo transiting into Afghanistan and concluded agreements and arrangements for reverse transit. As such, the Northern Distribution Network will remain of critical importance as transition reaches culmination in 2014 and Afghan National Security Forces take over security lead and international forces conduct a responsible draw down.

Additionally, I want to note that Kyrgyzstan has hosted the Transit Center at Manas International Airport for over a decade. As you know well, Mr. Chairman, the Transit Center fulfills crucial roles in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, both as a key stop for all our troops entering and exiting Afghanistan, and as a hub for aerial refueling, among other missions. As a result of the recently concluded Strategic Partnership Agreement with the Government of Afghanistan, we are evaluating what support will be needed as we fulfill our partnership commitments to Afghanistan. We continue to have preliminary discussions on the post-2014

future of the Transit Center with the Kyrgyz government. However, let me be clear that the United States does not seek to establish any permanent bases in Central Asia.

New Silk Road

Beyond security cooperation, regional economic integration and opportunity will also be essential for a secure, stable and prosperous Afghanistan. Secretary Clinton has highlighted many times over the past year her vision of economic cooperation, trade liberalization, and increased trade flows throughout the region, referring to it as a ‘New Silk Road.’ This New Silk Road envisions a network of economic and transit connections running throughout Central and South Asia, with Afghanistan at its heart. Success, of course, will depend on the continued engagement of its neighbors and we are collaborating closely with the Central Asian governments to make this vision a reality.

The Central Asian countries have also consistently supported Afghanistan through the Istanbul Process, in which Afghanistan’s neighbors have committed to a series of ambitious confidence building measures and a process of regular consultations. Three of the seven Istanbul Process Confidence Building Measures focus on economic cooperation and there are several initiatives underway to increase trade and promote a shared prosperity. Other regional groupings to advance Central Asian and Afghan economic cooperation include the Regional

Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan, which endorsed in March an Afghan blueprint for regional integration that we support.

In the context of the New Silk Road, I would like to highlight our work to empower Central Asian and Afghan women economically through the Women's Economic Symposium. The inaugural event was held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in July 2011 with the complete support of the Government of Kyrgyzstan. Women from Central Asian and Afghanistan attended to learn to develop women run enterprises and to foster relationships amongst themselves. As we promised to House Foreign Affairs Committee staff in a conference call during the Congressional Notification process, when discussing our intent for the Symposium, we have worked hard to ensure it was not just a one-off conference, but an event that launched an initiative. Since last year, we have committed over \$1.7 million to supporting the action recommendations from the Symposium. Although efforts are still ongoing, Women's Economic Symposium follow-on activities have been directly responsible for increasing the number of businesses owned by women, increasing their access to credit, capacity training and increased political participation. I look forward to discussing additional impacts after we formally evaluate the initiative.

Human Rights

Mr. Chairman, I would also like to emphasize that our enhanced engagement with the Central Asian governments does not focus only on security and economic issues, but consistently includes frank and open discussions about the need for political liberalization, more operating space for civil society, and respect for universally recognized human rights. These are not always easy conversations, but our bilateral relationships cannot reach their full potential without support for universal human rights and fundamental freedoms. Our engagement with the Central Asian governments at every level includes an open discussion of the importance of an active civil society, independent media, democratic reforms and the rule of law. We also meet with civil society and non-governmental organizations at every opportunity. But we believe that the path to progress on these issues is more engagement with these governments, not less. As Secretary Clinton has said, “Once you state your concerns, if you do not engage, you have no influence.”

Mr. Chairman, I will now briefly highlight key issues in our relations with each country.

Kazakhstan

As I noted in my introductory remarks, in recognition of an expansion in the depth and breadth of our cooperation with Kazakhstan, this year, Secretary Clinton elevated our engagement to the level of a strategic partnership dialogue.

Kazakhstan is considered to have the best investment climate in the Central Asian region as evidenced by the numerous international firms that utilize Kazakhstan as a regional headquarters. Over the past 20 years, U.S. companies have invested just over \$16.5 billion in Kazakhstan. Currently, a GE-Kazakh joint venture manufactures locomotives in Kazakhstan, while FedEx operates a successful shipping center in Almaty. North Dakota is exporting Angus and Hereford cattle to Kazakhstan, as part of a deal which promises to revitalize the country's cattle industry. Boeing has also been very successful in Central Asia, announcing deals worth nearly \$2 billion in just the first quarter of 2012. Kazakhstan has supported expanded trade in the region and has invested in the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation infrastructure network. We strongly support Kazakhstan's bid to join the World Trade Organization and look forward to its anticipated WTO accession.

The United States appreciates the commitment Kazakhstan made in June during the Istanbul Process conference to help fund the Afghan National Security forces after 2014 and its generous program to educate 1,000 Afghan students in Kazakhstani universities and vocational schools. These are excellent examples of Afghanistan's close neighbors stepping in to provide support for stability. Kazakhstan has also been a strong and consistent partner on non-proliferation issues. For example, in November 2010, we completed a long and complicated

project to safely shut down the BN-350 reactor in Aktau, secure the spent fuel it produced, and then package and transport the spent fuel more than 2,100 miles for secure storage in Eastern Kazakhstan. At the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul, Kazakhstan affirmed its commitment to establish a regional nuclear security training center.

While Kazakhstan has made progress in fulfilling the promise of their chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the OSCE Summit they hosted in 2010, we will continue to work with the Government of Kazakhstan toward our mutual goal of a fully democratic system and strong civil society that work together to protect internationally recognized human rights. In this context, I would note that the United States was disturbed by the use of deadly force against protesters in Zhanaozen last December, and while we appreciate the legal process that has resulted in convictions of both protestors who used violence and police who reacted with excessive force, we have raised our concerns about allegations of torture, mistreatment and selective punishment of some who were detained during and shortly after the events in Zhanaozen. We have called on the government to ensure these allegations are fully investigated and that individuals are held accountable for their actions. More broadly speaking, we continue to urge progress on a range of human rights issues, including freedoms of expression and religion, in our dialogue with Kazakhstan on support

for civil society and human rights. As part of our strategic partnership dialogue, our governments routinely host forums with democracy and human rights NGOs in Astana and Washington.

Kyrgyzstan

The United States has made support for Kyrgyzstan's democracy a cornerstone of our Central Asia strategy. We remain committed to the people of Kyrgyzstan as they work to further develop democratic institutions and practices. The U.S. allocated nearly ten million dollars in support of civil society, rule of law, human rights and democratic reform in fiscal year 2012 and in our 2013 request. As part of the 2010 parliamentary and 2011 presidential election cycles in Kyrgyzstan, our assistance funded training for over 50,000 election officials across the country.

That support and the hard work of the government and voters in Kyrgyzstan have enabled great progress towards democracy, with competitive elections in 2010 and 2011. As a result of the 2011 elections, the people of Kyrgyzstan accomplished a peaceful and democratic transfer of presidential power, something that has never happened before in Central Asia. This is profound change that affirms the rights and expectations of ordinary citizens, and shapes our long-term view of the close partnership between our countries.

In order to fully realize and sustain its democratic goals, we continue to urge Kyrgyzstan to work actively on national reconciliation. Meaningful democracy requires that the rights of all of Kyrgyzstan's citizens be respected and upheld fully throughout the justice and law enforcement systems, as required by Kyrgyzstan's constitution and its international obligations. The United States continues to engage interlocutors regularly in Kyrgyzstan so that we make clear the critical importance of ending abuses of detainees and holding the perpetrators of such abuses accountable under the rule of law. This is especially important for all cases arising out of the June 2010 violence.

Next month, I will lead the U.S. delegation to the Annual Bilateral Consultation with Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek. Kyrgyzstan continues to be a strong partner in international coalition efforts in Afghanistan, especially in hosting the Transit Center at Manas International Airport in support of coalition operations. The United States looks forward to continuing our longstanding cooperation with the Kyrgyz Republic to address regional challenges of terrorism and narcotics trafficking.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan has supported Afghanistan through humanitarian aid and by the construction of rail and energy infrastructure that will more fully integrate Afghanistan into the region. The recent signing of gas sales and purchase

agreements between Turkmenistan, Pakistan and India enables the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline to move to the commercial phase. This project is one example of the potential Turkmenistan has to be a leader in the economic prosperity of the region. We encourage Turkmenistan to build clear and transparent mechanisms for investment in its country.

In order to realize its potential, Turkmenistan must make significant steps to fulfill its international obligations on human rights. The United States consistently raises concerns about respect for human rights at every appropriate opportunity and we have offered assistance to help advance space for civil society and building democratic systems.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan remains a strong supporter of efforts to help Afghanistan. It also has made accession to the WTO a key priority in our bilateral relationship: the United States supports Tajikistan in its efforts to increase trade. Through Embassy Dushanbe, we are providing technical assistance to help Tajikistan make the necessary changes to meet the requirements for membership. Tajikistan also needs to develop the agriculture sector, and improve the regulatory environment for foreign investment.

We recognize that energy issues and water management are challenging issues for Central Asia and have been sources of tension between Tajikistan and

Uzbekistan. Regarding the Roghun dam project, the United States has had a long-standing policy to support the World Bank process. The World Bank is funding two feasibility studies to assess the technical, economic, environmental, and social impact of the proposed Roghun Dam. We continue to encourage the Government of Tajikistan to fully cooperate with the World Bank and not to move forward with construction or river diversion for the Dam until the completion of the feasibility studies.

The United States is concerned about Tajikistan's continuing efforts to limit human rights, including religious freedom and media freedoms. While we recognize the government's desire to promote security and prevent violent extremism, long-term peace and stability are only possible when accompanied by respect for human rights, the rule of law, the fostering of transparent and democratic governmental and civic institutions, and an open and unrestricted media environment. We continue to encourage Tajikistan to protect religious freedom, and to respect media freedom and refrain from interference in the media sector.

Uzbekistan

Next month, I will also lead the U.S. delegation to Tashkent to participate in this year's Annual Bilateral Consultation with Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan has been a critical part of regional support for Afghanistan, building a rail line connecting

Afghanistan to Central Asia and providing electricity that benefits the Afghan people. In addition, Uzbekistan has a central role in the Northern Distribution Network, with the majority of supplies transiting through the Uzbek-Afghan border. As you know, the Secretary certified in January that it is in the national security interest to waive the restrictions on security assistance for Uzbekistan, and as a result, we have been able to provide equipment and training necessary to counter threats from terrorist groups and narcotraffickers in the region.

During our upcoming annual bilateral consultations, we will work to make progress on creating the business environment necessary to increase economic investment by U.S. firms, boost education and cultural exchanges, address ongoing human rights concerns, and strengthen our security and defense cooperation.

We look forward to increasing cooperation with Uzbekistan in several areas. We are encouraged by General Motors' significant investment in the country, including its construction of a new automotive power train factory, and we hope Uzbekistan will take steps to attract more U.S. companies by addressing restrictive currency conversion laws and pervasive corruption issues. We are slowly increasing our science and technology cooperation. The U.S. Department of Agriculture is working with Uzbekistan's Institute of Genetics on cotton genomes, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science plans to hold a conference in Tashkent this September. Still, registration requirements have

slowed our cooperation, and we hope Uzbekistan will permit greater peer-to-peer interaction. Finally, we are pleased to welcome Uzbek students and educators to the U.S. as part of several educational exchange programs, but we have asked Uzbekistan to strengthen its commitment to allow our Fulbright scholars to study and teach there.

While we work hard to strengthen relations with Uzbekistan in our mutual interests, the United States continues to urge the Government of Uzbekistan to improve its record on human rights and we continually advocate for those who seek peaceful democratic reforms. In particular, we ask the government to take steps to eliminate the forced labor of children and adults during the cotton harvest and to prosecute those labor traffickers. We are also working with the Government of Uzbekistan to increase religious freedom by addressing its overly restrictive religious registration policies and allegations of arbitrary arrests and detentions of peaceful religious leaders. We also regularly engage with members of civil society from Uzbekistan and the diaspora community on these issues.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, we are working toward a future in which the United States and the countries of Central Asia are partners for peace, security, economic development, democracy, and prosperity. We envision a region where goods and services flow easily and efficiently between the Central Asian

Countries, Afghanistan and South Asia. Changes occur slowly in Central Asia. However, our consistent engagement with these countries can be mutually beneficial, as demonstrated by progress over the last few years in security cooperation and regional projects in support of the New Silk Road vision. We will continue to strengthen our ties with these important countries and their people and thereby advance U.S. interests in this strategically important region.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.